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ABSTRACT

A set of matrices are described that were created to be used in selecting appropriate practica experiences for students in graduate level special education teacher training programs. Two practicum matrices were designed to take into consideration the following factors in deciding on acceptable practicum experience for each student: (1) educational training and teaching experience; (2) available placement site alternatives; and (3) the purpose of the practicum (completion of a master's degree or certification only). In addition to a description of these matrices, potential research questions are also raised regarding the use of these matrices. (JD)

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Abstract

A set of matrices are described that were created to be used in selecting appropriate practica experiences for students in graduate level special education teacher training programs. The matrices incorporate each student's previous educational background and teaching experiences, a variety of practicum site options which are available and the purpose for which they are completing the practica. In addition to a description of these matrices, potential research questions are also raised regarding the use of these matrices.

A Decision Making Practicum Matrix for Graduate Programs

Introduction

Students often come to special education master's programs with diverse training, formal education and backgrounds. In addition, students entering field experiences also have very diverse expectations (Applegate & Lasley, 1985). As they enter teacher training programs, these differences often make it difficult to determine what kind of field-based experiences these students will need in order to succeed as master teachers. Field experiences are important as teachers remember these experiences as the most influential aspects of their program (Davies and Amershek, 1969). At the University of South Dakota, we have developed a decision making practicum matrix for selection of practicum alternatives. The purpose of this paper is to review the historical necessity of such a matrix and the rationale used to develop it. A review of the matrix and its applications at other teacher training institutions along with research capabilities are also discussed.

Historical Necessity

The University of South Dakota is located in the southeastern corner of South Dakota. Because of this proximity to other states, the majority of our special education graduate students come from Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. Each of these states, unlike South Dakota, has

a categorical certification system. In Iowa, recent changes in certification guidelines require in-service masters-level special education teachers attain a second supervised practicum experience in an area of exceptionality other than the one they currently teach. Some states in the region require masters level degrees to teach in certain special education areas while others require only the baccalaureate. In addition, some teachers are given provisional special education certification without special education degrees. South Dakota, unlike the states that surround it, is a noncategorical state with one certification for all teachers of the mild to moderately handicapped.

South Dakota, like much of the region served by the University, is very rural. Endorsement in special education in South Dakota requires completion of a total degree program (undergraduate or graduate level). The current level of teacher salary is the lowest in the nation. This does not entice many people who are mobile to stay and teach in the state. Because of this, non-special education teachers are given provisional certification. Many of these provisionally certified teachers, who have had no special education coursework or very limited coursework, apply and are admitted to the graduate special education program at USD. Because special education coursework is offered at night and during summers, practicing teachers can work on their M.A.

degree and certification while holding a full-time job.

Another group of individuals frequently apply for special education graduate programs due to a lack of vacancies in their teaching field. Some of these applicants have never had a teaching position while some are recent graduates of USD in elementary or secondary education. Others have not been teaching for many years due to a decision to stay home and raise a family and now want to get back into teaching for personal or financial reasons. Yet another group of students are those who have an undergraduate degree in special education which they received from USD or another institution.

The circumstances described above are probably not very different than special education graduate programs in most other universities. Programs in states which allow only personnel trained at the post-graduate level to provide special education services probably do not see this diverse a student population.

In the past, nearly uniform practica were provided for all students with any flexibility based solely on advisors' discretion. Problems resulting from serving students with varied backgrounds and different certification needs created a need for the practicum matrices. Even when students come with equal skills, it is difficult to see that each student in a field experience acquires similar knowledge from the experiences (Applegate, 1985). The matrices have provided some

continuity to practicum decision making.

Rationale

Treating students as if they entered graduate practica with the same knowledge base has two effects on the graduate program and the quality of the training that is provided these teachers:

1) The sophistication of content presented is limited by the need to provide prerequisite information to those student with limited background knowledge about special education. In essence, half of the students are lost and the other half are bored.

2) Students with teaching experience are able to link instructional theories and instructional methodologies because they have observed or worked with students in their natural academic habitat. Thus, they are better able to assimilate and accommodate the information based on personal experiences. Those students with limited teaching experience, however, lack the questions, problems needing solutions and the experiential base which makes the abstract concrete.

Graduate students having no educational background in special education and/or no firsthand experience with handicapped children have been consistently observed as having more difficulty in their USD practica. Inexperienced students were not as able to analyze and apply content. Therefore, it has been necessary to provide practicum experiences early in the masters level program

for individuals with less teaching experience.

Problems in standardizing graduate practica to fit the needs of individual students prompted the development of a decision making matrix. A description of the matrices' components follows.

The Practicum Matrices

Two practicum matrices were designed to take into consideration the following three factors in deciding on acceptable practicum alternatives for each student: (1) educational training and teaching experience, (2) available placement site alternatives, and (3) the purpose of the practicum (completion of master's degree or certification only). Two separate matrices were designed to accomodate the third factor, one for students seeking certification only, and the other for students completing a masters' degree. Each of these first two components became dimensions on both of these matrices.

Educational background and teaching was the first dimension of both matrices. Each matrix allows for evaluation of the university training of the applicants. This dimension answered the question, "Was the undergraduate major in elementary education, secondary education, special education or a degree other than in an education area?" A second element to be considered is teaching experience. The important question were: "Did the applicant have any previous teaching experience and was that experience in regular education or special

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The two dimensions of background and placement alternatives were analyzed on both matrices. In each cell of the matrices two decisions are made: Would the placement be viable and appropriate for the student with a specific background? How much time should the student be involved in a particular setting? Together, these matrices have standardized practicum site selection and time commitments.

Table 1 is the matrix for practica that serve as a culmination to the master's degree course of studies. It should be noted that the bottom column lists an internship which serves as a pre-practicum experience at the beginning of the graduate level coursework and which is now required of some students depending on their backgrounds. Individual cells indicate the number of weeks required based on each setting or the word "no" indicating this would not be an acceptable alternative in this situation.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 is a similar matrix which has been designed for students seeking certification only. This matrix has been designed for students who have already been teaching handicapped students and/or completed degree programs in special education. Again, the x axis describes backgrounds of the students and the y axis describes the

placement alternatives. Required weeks in the placement are indicated along with the need for an additional internship in some of the cells.

Insert Table 2 about here

Each university special education program functions with a unique set of standards, placement alternatives, and student population. Therefore, the specific items included in the matrix probably will not match the needs of other teacher training programs. The model may, however, provide a starting point in establishing a defensible and comprehensive plan for practicum experiences.

Research Potential

The use of this matrix is a new addition to the advisement process here at USD. It also serves as a framework for the following research questions:

1. Does this framework produce more meaningful outcomes in terms of university classroom performance and ability to adapt instruction following theoretical coursework?

2. Should experiences other than direct teaching be taken into consideration on the matrices? Do non-traditional students who have elected to stay home and raise a family have some of the same background experiences with children that experienced teacher have?

Can this be measured through a pretesting using video tapes of instructional activities and having the person analyze the observations?

3. Since teacher effectiveness literature researchers found that special education teachers are separated by their ability to use many exemplars in their teaching, should we pretest graduate students entering the program using video taping of the graduate students to observe which of the teacher effectiveness principles the teacher is able to use in a teaching interaction?

4. Does the internship at the beginning of the graduate program provide the types of experience necessary to help graduate students generate topics for research questions, observe the characteristics of children with certain types of handicaps, accommodate the need for the instructional methodologies presented in the coursework?

4. Have we placed an overemphasis on practical teaching experiences? Are graduate students able to apply what is presented in graduate classes in the teaching setting without a supervised practicum experience?

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Table 1

Practicum Matrix for Completion of Master's Degree

Practicum Options	Background				
	Elementary or Secondary Education Degree No Teaching	Elementary or Secondary Education Degree Teaching Experience	Undergraduate Special Education Degree	No Special Education Degree: Special Education Teaching Experience	Degree Other Than Education
On Campus	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks
Off Campus Full Days Another Teacher's Room	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	8 Weeks
Off Campus Own Room With College Supervision	NO	NO	12 Weeks	NO	NO
Another Teacher's Room Part of Day	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Additional Initial Internship	3 Credit Hours (4 weeks or Equivalent)	1-3 Credit Hours	NO	NO	3 Credit Hours

Table 2

Practicum Matrix for Certification Only

Practicum Options	Previous Special Education Masters Practicum	Background: Previous Undergraduate Special Education Student Teaching	Previous Special Education Teaching Experience in That Field	Previous Special Education Teaching Experience Not in That Field	No Teaching Experience
On Campus	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Week Internship + 4 Week Practicum
Own Classroom With Supervision	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	12 Weeks	NO	NO
Another Teacher's Room Off Campus Full Days	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	6 Weeks	4 Week Internship + 4 Week Practicum
Another Teacher's Room Part of Day	14 Weeks	14 Weeks	14 Weeks	NO	NO

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